Margo Okazawa-Rey

Part I

2/26/2015

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CTM: So we're talking this afternoon, it's February 26th, 2015 and we're talking to Margo Okazawa-Rey about her feminist journey, right? So Margo, you know, both of us realized the other day, I think, that we've known you for decades!

MOR: Yeah, a couple of decades.

LEC: It's amazing!

CTM: Isn't that kind of amazing, when you think about—

MOR: Yeah.

CTM: —having travelled, even if we've never been in the same space for very long, I guess, physically, but we've kind of been travelling together along so many different paths.

MOR: You know, we have—it's amazing when we think about it, when we stop and think about it, these kinds of things we just take for granted, or as given.

CTM: Yeah.

LEC: Yeah.

MOR: I think it also means, you know, how these transnational…trans we are in general—transcontinental, transdisciplinary…

CTM: Right, yeah. And how maybe, one of the reasons we stay together, after all these decades is because we have, so many things that in our lives that have crossed at different moments! Things we've been passionate about or struggled with or—

LEC: Similar experiences.

CTM: Been in solidarity with. So that's what we want to talk to you about, you know. So, if you were asked, you know, what was your, you know, what started you on your journey as a feminist? How did you get involved in—how did you think about yourself as a feminist?

MOR: Hmm, I think you know, I've done kind of the classic, the personal is political, example and by that I mean, you know, I started my life journey in a transnational context, in a sense, by the way my parents met. My father was part of the occupying force in Japan; my mother was part of the occupied. And never the twain should meet, in an intimate context, right? It was just as occupier and the occupied, and for a bunch of reasons, one because my mom was feminist herself, you know, they got together and that's a whole other story. But just the fact that my own birth kind of signifies or personifies something that's not supposed to exist at that historical moment, right? And so in my life I've had to kind of figure out questions of identity and place, and there was a time when I just really wanted to fit in, right. So and this was before I came out. And I tried, you know fit in racially, in terms of gender, whatever. And…. but when I came out as a lesbian, I thought "Oh my god, there's not going to be one place where I am gonna fit." And so—.

CTM: When was that? Like how old were you?

MOR: That was when I was twenty-four, I'd just graduated from college, you know, out of college. But, a couple of years of coming out and all that stuff; I realized the thing to do is to help create places for people who, according to established categories 'don't fit.' So it really did grow out of a, you know, personal, personal place of figuring out a place

LEC: And where was the place that that happened?

MOR: The geographic place that happened was Boston. And you know Boston-Cambridge in 1972 was quite a place.

LEC: Mm-hmm.

CTM: Mm-hmm.

MOR: I met lots of other feminists, feminists of color, white women, and a whole generation of us was going through that journey, of who we are, what our politics are and, it was really a very, very exciting time because there were so many ideas that we were trying to explore. Like, monogamy, non-monogamy [laughter] you know. And even little bits around transgender stuff. There was just a lot to think about, a lot of experimentation. And we really had to sort out what our values, what really matters to

us; you know we tried living collectively. I mean there were all of these kinds of social experiments. And through that, I learned a lot, to say the least.

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But one of the things I learned and became clear about were my politics, and my values and what really mattered. I mean and that was I would say almost a ten year journey, you know from 1972 to 1984, I mean '72 to '82, right around that. And so that was the personal part, but it was very much connected to the political. And my politics are very much rooted in sort of what I notice around me, as well as you know, what I'm reading, the conversations I'm having with people, but they're not abstract. You know, they're not theoretical, in a kind of a classic sense, right? They're theoretical in a feminist theoretical sense, and kind of theorizing from lived experience and then putting that together with, things I'm learning through reading and you know, conversations with folks like you. So I feel very grounded and steady. You know, as I'm growing in, what I think and how I think, where I've kind of landed at this point of my life. Yes, so that's kind of it, in a nutshell. So you know, another well, so the first point has to do with the situation I was born into, and then much later, a really important turning point for me was going on that Fulbright research fellowship to South Korea. And that's where I really began to think about and experience the category of nation. You know, when you're in a dominant category you don't really think about it, until you have a contrasting experience.

CTM: When was that?

MOR: That was, what year was that, 1994.

CTM: Okay.

MOR: Before then I'd been active in various activist projects, and I was a member of the Combahee River Collective before we were Combahee River Collective, and then we named ourselves. I was with them through all that. But, that—

CTM: So say a couple of words about that…what was that experience like?

MOR: Oh about that, okay. So this was I would say this was the winter of '75, 1975, and I met up with this group of black feminists, I can't remember how I got connected to them, but I did, that's a detail I can't quite remember, and we used to meet in one of our members living rooms—Helen Stewart, who, hmm, and you know at that time there were maybe five of us meeting together. And the ages ranged from twenty—who we considered the baby of the group—and the oldest person was Helen, and I think she was twenty-six or twenty-seven. So we were, we were young. And we were just trying to, kind of explain our lives really. Many of us were lesbian—not all, some were bisexual, you know etc. But anyway, we were in Boston, active in lots of

different projects and struggles and just trying to figure out, so, where do we fit in, as black women, as black lesbians, as socialists, feminists, etc.? And it was interesting, lots of contradictions, and we were not setting out to make history, right? We simply were trying to explain our lives and theorize about what was going on around us, and our place in it. And it's kind of a shock to me every time when I hear, you know, the Combahee River Statement and people are doing dissertations about that in one way or another. And so, that's another example of, you know, my practice and my theories being really lived, and connected to the struggles I'm involved in or the various groups of women I'm involved with.

CTM: See I think what makes the Combahee River Collective statement also, to me, powerful is that it is so explicitly socialist, and anti-capitalist. So the critique I think, there aren't that many examples of those kinds of connections being made including a very central critique of capitalism.

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MOR: Yes, yes, exactly. And that's why I get so upset when these days, many in our—the feminist academy and other places in the academy have reduced intersectionality down to multiple identities. Because that was just one strand of how we saw the intersections, right? There was absolutely an anti-imperialist, materialist analysis, right? So, you know, my goal now is to really push that back in, and say, you can't do intersectionality without looking at those two or three other strands.

LEC: Because there's a particular kind of history, there's a particular kind of materiality attached to that history that locates women of color in specific places, particularly in this US capitalism. And if we don't understand that, then what is intersectionality? Nothing but identities.

MOR: Yes. Exactly. And I just absolutely detest it. So I wanna go on record saying that.

CTM: No, absolutely. Okay so—

MOR: So then forward a bit, and I went to Korea as a Fulbright scholar, and what I wanted to do…my proposal was to try to understand what Korean people thought of African-American people before they arrived in the US, because this was a time when there were all these tensions between Korean merchants and African-American communities, and there was the big Red Apple incident in New York, LaTasha Harlins in LA, there was stuff in Boston, you know…everywhere, everywhere, and I was living in Washington at the time and had helped found this group called the Afro-Asian Relations Council, you know, trying to bring together the two groups. But I thought, well they couldn't have just come here clean slate. They had to have some idea. So, I went with that in mind, but I actually ended up looking at the extensive

presence of US bases, and at the time there were over a hundred bases and installations in South Korea, which is about one-fourth the size of California, and I was shocked. And also, because, and then, you know there were lots of military personnel, there's a base right in the middle of Seoul (which is the capital of the country), and that was shocking. But I also speak Japanese, and the way I could communicate with many of the Korean people of a particular generation was through Japanese. And that was because of the Japanese occupation, right? The Japanese colonization of Korea. So here I am, in the middle of Seoul, you know, having this US passport and then speaking Japanese, and finding myself connected to these two imperial nations that had such an impact on Korea. And then, because of how I look, pretty ambiguous, people couldn't figure me out. I remember being in a phone booth, trying to make a phone call, and somebody taps on the, it was one of those phone boxes, somebody taps on the window and asks me, you know in very rough English, "Are you Filipina?" and I said, "No." So there's this kind of micro, and all the macro global things happening right in the middle of Seoul, this one day, you know and…all the time I was there. So really, you know, you can look backwards and see your location much better than you can when you're back there. And so just, getting a sense of that, and then really looking at militarism. My own origin in a military context, and looking at Korea, and then through my friend Gwyn (Gwyn Kirk), making the connections of the bases in the Philippines, Korea, Okinawa, and Japan. That's how we really kind of launched the network, it started as East Asia-US Women Against Militarism. And that brought in all those countries as well as the US. So again, that's kind of another example of being in a particular situation and trying to make sense of it and then something coming out of that…that, you know, that kind of work.

CTM: Right, but it's more than also just being in a particular situation, from what I'm hearing from you, it's also that it's about how you anchor yourself and your identity and your politics and your questions, in that particular space, so that there are connections between the questions the intellectual political questions you take on, and your own life as you see it, as you understand your own trajectory, your identity, all of these kinds of things.

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LEC: Because in some ways—

MOR: Yeah, I think that's a very nice way to put it, a lovely way to put it actually.

LEC: Because in some ways you are, in some ways, the embodiment of all those intersections and contradictions. So it helps you to really understand them, not only as an outsider within like, when you're are in Korea, but an insider without, as Japanese, as relating to the coloniality of Japan and Korea, the US and Korea, as you were

saying before, that it brings them really to a center for you, that makes complete sense to you individually.

MOR: Yes, and what you are saying is really a good way to talk about, you know what my mother said to me, in a very concrete way, and this was when I was very young, living in Japan, and there were some kids who were teasing me. And I said to my mom, you know, "Am I Japanese?" and she said, "Yes, you are absolutely Japanese, but that can be mostly inside the house, and when you go outside, people are going to see you as black," right, and I don't know how she knew that, but that's exactly what you're getting to and she gave me the permission to be both, but also to contextualize it. You know? Which was a very important early lesson I think.

LEC: A lesson in self-empowerment, because she's giving you permission to be.

MOR: Yes. And she must have understood it on some level for herself as well.

CTM: And it's sort of an interesting and very concrete way to understand multiple identities. That they are not multiple in the sense of one plus one plus one, but they're multiple in the sense of the layers that we live, that are relevant at all moments of our lives. They're not, you know you may be Japanese indoors, but you are also African American, it just isn't something that is focused on necessarily and something else—

MOR: It depends on the context, you know. Those glass jars that have multicolored layered sand? You know, they're different colors but they're not just layered, you know, absolutely horizontally, right? You can see the way that the sand settles, and if you shake it up, you get a different—

CTM: Nice image, about intersectionality about multiplicity, actually. Because sometimes the way we talk about those things are, you know we separate stuff. And it's difficult to talk about things like intersectionality and multiplicity in very dynamic ways and this is a very dynamic image, you know, of shifts.

MOR: I think that's how I experience my life, you know? Just, things change a lot. Certain things always remain, right? They get moved to different places, depending on, you know where I am. It's through my work with the network where I really began to understand about what transnational feminist praxis is. And kind of the core of it, you know being…building strong relationships. It's the sturdy connections that keep the network going, right. It's not just the tasks, in fact, the tasks, you know are kind of the least of it, in a sense, that holds the thing together. Of course we're about the tasks, about the various activities and actions, but over the years, now the network is going on twenty years, right, it's the quality of the relationships among the members, and there's a core group of us in all the countries, and it's those relationships that have really carried the day. Right? And just for example, I just came back from Gwyn's 70th birthday party and every country group sent something, you know, talking about the impact she's had on their lives, you know and the network,

and all that stuff. This is over a twenty-year span of time, you know, that we've been working together.

CTM: It must have been so moving. I saw those photographs, on Facebook.

MOR: Yeah, it was absolutely moving—you need to get on Facebook.

[Laughter]

CTM: She needs to friend you on Facebook is what she needs to do.

MOR: So yeah, it was very moving, because in the moment you're not thinking about what impact are you going to make; you're just fully present, engaging, doing the work, you know, being human, being feminist.

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And then looking backward, all of these things are brought forward so to speak, and you are reminded, you know, you don't think about necessarily what impact you're having in the moment.-- and then, you know, I ended up in Palestine.

CTM: I was just gonna say, so how did this lead you to—?

MOR: So there was a conference in 2003, called "Feminist Debates on Peace and Security." It was in Zurich. And a friend of mine in Sri Lanka, named Malathi de Alwis, a Sri Lankan feminist who I'd met in another context, who emailed me and said, "Look, you know, there's this conference going on, and there's nothing from Asia. Maybe you should send them something." So uncharacteristically, I did…I sent them an email, and said, "Maybe I can contribute something about Asia." And immediately they replied, and I ended up there and it was just an amazing experience as well. But one of the highlights, of course, was meeting my friend, the late Maha Abu-Dayyeh and I gave a keynote and she gave a keynote, and then we ended up in a workshop together, where she and Cynthia Cockburn were talking about women living under occupation and militarism and I just was in the audience. And then we got to know each other through that conference. And then about a year and a half later, she invited me to come to help start the research and documentation unit at her organization, the Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counseling in Ramallah and Jerusalem at the time. And I just couldn't believe it, you know and of course I went. You know, when things come up so serendipitously I always kind of jump at it and then see what's in store for me. And that was ten years ago, you know, exactly. And what was, one thing that was similar is thinking about what it means to be connected to the US, as part of an occupying force, and my country the USA being such a supporter and actually the foundation of the occupation, economic, political and ideological. And what it means to be in Ramallah or the West Bank, you know, more

broadly, or occupied East Jerusalem and doing the work I'm doing and asking questions about what's my role there. You know, I was invited there, I didn't just barge in or go on a tourist kind of or some adventure, but it still raises those questions, doesn't it, even though you're invited in? Some of those same questions kind of, emerge. What's my role, what's my responsibility, both there and how do I enter into those places? And ten years later, I can say with all humility that it's about the quality of the relationships. Sort of just of going in, unassuming anything, and absolutely showing up and actually being of service, in whatever ways I could. And then, the other side of that is also seeing the disconnect between academics and the NGO folks, and I was really, you know, very in the swim with the NGO people and less connected with the academics. One of the reasons I was brought in is, there was a sense, among staff at the Center as well as Maha, that the academics do what academics often do, right, kind of gather the data, use the knowledge of those at the center and then not really give them credit, or not be much,very much service oriented. And in Palestine it's very specific, because everybody knows each other, and there's a history of struggle and everything, but at the same time there's still that—structural divide, right?

CTM: Absolutely.

MOR: And I remember having a conversation with one academic, at Bierzet, and she was asking me what kind of research I was teaching.

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And, you know I said, "Well, I really come from the perspective of feminist research methodologies and really honoring women's experiences, and so it tends to be qualitative." and you know she was so adamant, like "That's gonna get you nowhere, and that's not gonna show you anything." And I was shocked at the vehemence with which she came back at me. And I said, "Well, I disagree with you and you know, it seems that the ways that we're talking about research at the Center resonates with the staff, and the volunteers who are working with us. So, you know let's just agree to disagree." And I think, I saw her, you know, when I was at Maha's funeral, and she kind of was very emotional—and so I inferred from that maybe she had some little second thoughts.

CTM: A shift.

MOR: I don't know…a shift, but second thoughts. I hope so anyway.

CTM: I'm sorry, Linda, I'm going completely off script with everything.

LEC: So I see!

[Laughter]

MOR: There are other questions? Sorry I'm going off script too, I'm just talking.

LEC: No, no, this is great.

CTM: We had, it's okay, we are having follow up interviews and stuff right?

LEC: This is working. It's okay, but I'm glad you recognized it!

MOR: We can edit things out, you know.

[Laughter]

CTM: No, so I'm now thinking about how you conceptualize being a feminist and what it means for you to live a feminist life. Because I think some of what you described, right, is very much about a very deep understanding of living a particular kind of life, being of service in a particular way, understanding the world in a certain way, you know. I'm understanding your space, your place, your way of approaching the world. So how would you?

MOR: So what's feminism about, I think, is that absolutely centering the lives of women, and I mean women, and that, of course by definition then you understand other people—children, girls, boys, men, transgender people I guess as well. But recognizing the ways in which women's lives are affected in particular ways by the various forces that, you know we see around us, economic globalization, militarism, religious fundamentalisms. You know, all the big forces and how they affect women in specific locations, but there are also certain common, you know threads that I think being transnational in the ways that I've talked about helps me see the connections without being reductionist, right. So for me the feminism is—and my kind of feminism and I think you all share this—it's a materialist feminism, it's an anti-imperialist feminism, it's an intersectional feminism that pulls in all those forces and institutional arrangements that enable us to see, you know that women's lives are affected in very profound ways, from micro to global, levels of analysis, right? But it is really centrally about looking at and improving the lives of women. And recognizing that I share a common destiny, we share a common destiny, even though the particularities obviously are very different.

LEC: Right and you see, that is what is so fundamental about this kind of feminism. As we were talking about this before we decided, when are we gonna do these interviews. That is what is so fundamental. Because listening to you, and listening to you talk about your life, it doesn't have any kind of linear structural thinking around what do we theorize about feminism and how do we live it. So listening to you, I hear

quite clearly that feminism is the lived experience, and understanding the impact of what you do on women's lives. And so as that changes, then you move with it, yeah?

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MOR: Yeah.

LEC: Because it's not—there can't be stasis; there can't be, you know, one mode or method of doing whatever, but you're seeing the impact on women's lives, and that is impacting you at the same time.

MOR: Right.

CTM: Which is different from having an academic area of expertise and then just staying within the boundaries of that area of expertise.

LEC: Not being able to move outside of it, because there is no pragmatism to that. There is no investment in anything else. And so this lived experience is separate from that. Like people who do that can't understand and appreciate what's going on in women's lives. What do we need to do to make a better tomorrow for all of us? Like when you go to Palestine, you have that kind of experience, it's forcing you to think, "Damn, something is wrong with this kind of capitalism that is going on in my country, that is impacting these women's lives in this horrible kind of way." And so it brings a different kind of understanding of what we need to create, and what really needs to happen, that makes this grounded feminism.

MOR: Yeah and I think I'm just having this realization now, you know, the title of Gwyn Kirk's and my intro to the women's studies textbook is "Women's Lives", right and it's sort of following women's lives, as I'm living my own life, and so there are new realizations all the time and new insights as I'm building on what I've already studied, or what I'm already familiar with. There's always…it's a kind of a theoretical dynamism I guess.

LEC: Where change is constant.

MOR: I don't want to make it too grand, but you get the idea. And that's to me what makes being this kind of feminist really enlivening, energizing, and at the core of it—you all have heard me say this before—for me the core of it is about a love that's big and foundational and so essential, you know to the relationships that I spoke about earlier, to vision. It all sort of comes together for me, around that.

CTM: So what—how are we doing time wise?

LEC: It's a quarter to four.

So we'll go another ten minutes maybe. Is that ok? And then we'll walk over to Minnie Bruce's.

LEC: 5-7 minutes more.

CTM: Yeah. So, if you were to tell us a little bit about sort of what were some of the difficult moments or challenges in doing this kind of work, with all the different communities people you have been working with, over the years?

MOR: Really good question, I think kind of confronting my own limitations. And then bracing them at the same time so I can grow, and that kind of vulnerability And figuring out how to face that. Not knowing when I think I should know something, I mean it's related to that, kind of bumping up against myself. Another one and I think this is especially in relation to Palestine, and this is kind of explaining to people what it is I'm doing, but not having the words to do it. And this is, one, because people don't really get Palestine, even though they might understand it in their minds, or they have images of it. So, you know like, "What are you doing there?" And I start talking and people's eyes kind of glaze over or their pupils dilate, right and I think I've lost them somehow. And I think about that as both the real challenge, but also kind of a metaphorical one, right? What happens when I'm trying to explain something, whether it's there or here, when some things just aren't very explainable and there are not necessarily words?

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And part of not having the words is maybe I'm not understanding something clearly enough, that I can put it in words, or there simply may not be words. And so I've started learning film, to you know to try and see if I can get a little creative. I think the other really hard thing is trying to be in two places at once and it's absolutely impossible. You can't be in two places at once, right! So I can't be here in the States, or in Berkeley where I live, and be in Palestine, right. So wherever I am, I almost have to let it go, in a funny way, to keep it together, to stay connected, you know. I can't just do this, it doesn't work. And at the same time now, I'm just figuring out how to stay connected to my colleagues in Palestine, so I signed up for this thing where you can send video emails. So a lot of times I send messages like "Hi, it's me! I've been thinking about you", like that! And this experience in Palestine really brought home that there's no freedom without connection and there's no connection without freedom, right! You can't just be free, you end up just being a helium balloon and you're gonna run out of air. Or, if there's no freedom, you're just connected, then you're gonna suffocate, you know. And just trying to figure out that balance between freedom and connection. I think it's really hard.

CTM: But really beautiful, and a really beautiful place to end, maybe, for now, no?

LEC: Yeah. We'll continue this, because this is really important and we have many other questions attached to all that you've said…

MOR: This was really interesting to me too! I've never sat and talked about it in this way, all at once.

LEC: And so you're hearing it differently.

MOR: Yeah. Saying it differently, hearing it differently and understanding it differently as well!

LEC: There's one other thing I wanted to ask you, and we'll follow up when we continue, is part of the glazed over and the exit that people take when you talk about Palestine, don't you think some of that has to do with, not just a basic lack of understanding, but lack of interest and connection to the 'other' because this is an other that has been connected in this country, right? In particular kinds of negative ways, that there is no connection.

CTM: Yeah, in very violent ways….

LEC: In very violent ways and there is no connection to that other so as I'm listening to you I'm thinking about Haiti; it happens with Haiti all the time, all the time! I've done a lot of work in Haiti and so I know the disconnect. You see it and feel it, it's like, "Oh, those people again, over there." So what is that, that you understand, that gives you a different kind of seeing and knowing that they can ever imagine, which prevents them from connecting too?

MOR: Yeah, yeah, I do, I was thinking too that being there, and living there, I got to experience lots of things that you wouldn't necessarily if you were just visiting. And when I was actually living there, those three years, I would sometimes go to Switzerland for these meetings, and I remember I went to get massages and I remember, you know, the body person saying, "Wow, you're carrying all this tension." You don't realize you know, that even though it's really secondary and I had lots of mobility because I'm not Palestinian, there are ways in which just being in that space and going through the daily check point experience, or the experience of my being round colleagues who just lost family or something there's this secondary impact, that I just didn't…

LEC: The body is taking it in and you're not even aware of it—

CTM: I was there nine days or eleven days, and Oh God! I was like this—!

MOR: It's really interesting, and being there, you just…

CTM: Thank you!

MOR: Welcome!

PART II
4/30/2015

LEC: Okay, so you were telling us about some of the challenges that you've encountered over the years, Margo, doing this work and how would you say that those challenges impacted the goals and outcomes that you initially envisioned when you started?

MOR: I think one challenge that I didn't mention before is the challenge of building institutions and how much energy and vision and effort and time and work it takes to create those institutions.

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And then how quickly they can fall apart, implode, from the weight of contradictions or some internal discord and I think, a big challenge for us is, to build institutions that can sustain in, sometimes, earthquakes and still be flexible and responsive and not get stuck. So, I think that's something that I've been thinking about lately, most recently about the challenge of creating institutions that are solid, that are responsive and can withhold or withstand earthquakes, metaphorically speaking and that breathe and continue to develop and grow, you know, as the material and political conditions change. Having said that, I think another challenge is knowing when to let institutions go and how to end institutions gracefully.

CTM: Right.

MOR: You know, with dignity and recognizing that its time for this formation to end and then move to something else. And, I think, that requires a certain kind of redefined leadership, really, so that the power and the position can also be flexible, right, with the changes that need to take place.

LEC: You know, because we have all been in organizing for so many years, here when you talk about, you know, the implosions and what happens like a kind of self-destruction thing, how do you think these implosions, they can't be prevented, we know that, but managed in more strategic ways that the organization can continue without falling apart.

MOR: I think, in my experience—and I'm thinking of two very specific examples—I think, we as feminists need to develop a methodology that includes something about a much more conscious way to think about personal growth, personal development, dealing with the own contradictions we face in our lives in the ways in which we haven't taken care of each other and of ourselves in a way that we can deal with whatever traumatic experiences we've had or betrayals, you know or the negative experiences we've had as activists or in the academy, so that we're not taking it out on each other, which is often, right, all of us have seen that, right?

LEC: That's right.

CTM: Right.

MOR: So, what kind of methodology will help us do the work, become conscious, do the healing as we're doing the work, right? And I think they're separated out, so we go to therapy, lets say, for example, well, we see the therapeutic is really being separated from the intellectual or the activist part. What kind of methodology will really help us bring all of those parts together and do it in a conscious and purposeful way?

CTM: So do you think this means some way of re-envisioning the self?

MOR: Yes.

CTM: Re-envisioning of feminist self?

MOR: Yes.

CTM: What that might mean—

MOR: Yes.

CTM: —in terms of relationships with other people.

MOR: Yes.

CTM: Other feminists?

MOR: Yes.

LEC: Even though understanding that self, there will be no uniformity to it.

CTM: Right.

LEC: But there's a consciousness about it.

CTM: Right.

LEC: That makes it sensitive to each other.

CTM: Right.

MOR: Right and the way I envision that, Linda, is to think about the idea that there is no "I" without "you", right.

LEC: That's right.

CTM: Right, absolutely.

MOR: And that I am "I" and you are "you" but there isn't…it's together, right. The definition and the construction happens together. And I think it's really interesting that in you know, in Western psychology, pathology is codependence, right and eastern thought, you know, pathology is when you become too separated. It seems to me that we really need to figure out the relationship between the two, right. The separation and the togetherness and you know something I really have come to recognize from all my travels and being in very different places is that there's no connection without freedom and there's no freedom without connection, right.

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And I think, how do we put that principle in place as we're doing the work?

CTM: Right.

MOR: The intellectual work, the activist work.

CTM: And so that seems particularly poignant, right now, right, in terms of the kinds of divides….

MOR: Yes.

CTM: Around race, class, nationality, sexuality, ability, within a culture of neoliberalism?

MOR: Yeah.

CTM: Which has its own specific kind of impact on how people see themselves and how our relationship to institutions, to organizing, to complicity, to I mean, all of these ways of thinking, about even what freedom means…are impacted.

MOR: Yes, absolutely right. And I would add that its not just in the context of neoliberalism, but also in the context of hyper individualist way of being in the world

that's encouraged and seems to be spreading into other parts you know, it really is one of the hallmarks of US culture mainstream culture, but it seems to be really taking hold in other places as well. And oppression, the context of oppression that necessarily meant, you know, the appropriation of identity and agency and how to reclaim all of those things without having it being an individualist, you know self-absorbed, kind of identity and operating out of a politics of scarcity that says you know there's not enough status, there's not enough power, and whatever it is, we're not gonna share, it's not a collective way to think about power and status.

LEC: Right.

CTM: So how do you build solidarity in the face of all these things?

MOR: I think, solidarity, you know, I like your idea of the common context of struggle and I think there's the context, but I think there are also principles, you know, around which we build solidarities, right. So for real, we are talking about particular ways we struggle around various issues. But I think it can't just be struggle around issues, but it has to be also a struggle, a generative struggle, around vision, right. And it can't just be identities, although identities obviously are important, but I think, particularly in the US, we've really got bogged down into a very specific way to think about identities, right, it's sometimes very essentialist, it's very individualist also. Even though we talk group, I think we're often referring to ourselves, you know, my identity and so I think about principles and one of the principles has to be the principle of connectivity, right, staying connected, right and moving through various tensions, conflicts, contradictions, in a way where we stay committed to being connected and by that I mean that we're not gonna give up on each other, right, unless it's absolutely necessary, that's like the last resort.

LEC: Okay, so yeah, you were talking about the principles and the envisioning of a different world for women.

MOR: Well, one certainly would be connectivity, right, and by that I mean a commitment and a practice, not just a commitment but a practice, to work together to understand, dig deeper, work together to engage conflicts in very generative and creative ways and really, not give up on each other unless, its the last, absolute last thing to do, right, and then, even then, giving up to me doesn't mean that that person or those people or that group may not have another chance, right? But it's in the moment, we say, "Okay, you know, we need to let this go, maybe we'll come back to it." I think another kind of connectivity is, you know, connecting to our environment, whether it's the physical environment and remembering that we share a common destiny, with not only with human beings, but with the natural environment as well, and what kind of practice will help us remember that and stay connected.

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LEC: Right.

MOR: Right. I think another important principle is really thinking about creativity and redefining resources—

LEC: Right.

MOR: —so that you know, as we've talked about before, capitalism and neoliberalism, have really shaped what we value, right? As a society and many parts of the world, too. The material, the consumer, and thinking about the worth, value, of each other and of ideas, of the ways we're committed, there's something profoundly valuable about ideas and about vision, and that they're not just mechanical, technical things that we try to generate, but they're really creativity for example and generation of ideas and new knowledges are—

CTM: Also perhaps, based on connectivity and not extraction.

MOR: Yes, exactly! That we're not extracting from human beings or from the environment ideas and relatively, right, but that with true connectivity we're able to generate ideas, ways of doing, ways of being in the wider world. And I envision a new society or different society where there are lots of free spaces, where the visioning, the creativity, the activism can happen in a way that is really, can be ongoing. And we're thinking about seven generations, not just our generation or the next generation where I can see us dancing—kind of being romantic here—you know laughing and playing and being creative, right. And that we're also engaging in struggle because there are always new contradictions and we have to be prepared, right.

LEC: Right.

MOR: I don't see the new society as this clean place and that's the end of it, right.

LEC: Right.

CTM: Right.

MOR: Every generation, you know, every new project or redefined project bases contradictions—new—

LEC: New challenges—

MOR: —and new challenges. That's when, if we're creative, we're thinking generatively. Then we can face them, and we're connected—

LEC: Right.

MOR: —with one another; the principle of connectivity.

LEC: Well, given this, you know, in this envisioning this new world, considering the current generations, we don't know what it may be called, what they will call that after this, what do you see in the future of feminism, as we know particularly among women of color, in that new world?

MOR: Well, at the risk of sounding like a Luddite, you know, or a dinosaur, I mean I think some of the principles of feminism that have shaped me, I think, will apply for a while, you know, and one of those principles is really understanding power and the ways in which interpersonal, you know, structural, institutional, all the various ways in which power is made manifest, operates consciously, unconsciously, subliminally, one of the things that feminism has done has help us really think about that.

LEC: Right.

MOR: Think about power and particularly its impact on women and here I want to say women, as well as, you know, the broader category of gender, because I'm most specially interested in the lives of women, and you know, having done lots of work in various parts of the world, it's a very important category that shapes women, you know, people's experiences.

LEC: Right.

MOR: So, I don't want to lose that; I want to stay committed to that. And I think also that, you know, I think we've kind of lost it a little bit by saying "feminisms", right, I think there is "feminism", right, and there are various ways that women and people around the world practice it.

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And I think the essential part of feminism that I want to retain is the understanding of power at all the levels that I just mentioned, and the connectivity. And so I definitely think, you know, transnational feminism is important, you know, intersectionality, all those things—but the essence of it, I think, it would be a mistake to lose.

CTM: Mm-hmm.

MOR: And I want to hold fast to that.

LEC: Great, thank you.

CTM: Thank you.

LEC: This was wonderful, thank you!

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Feminist Freedom Warriors (FFW) is a first of its kind digital video archive and documentary project. Born out of an engagement in anti-capitalist, anti-racist struggles as women of color from the Global South, this project is about cross-generational histories of feminist activism addressing economic, anti-racist, social justice and anti-capitalist issues across national borders.